



An odd request from his dying daughter was the catalyst that changed Reb Dovid Ninchinsky's life forever. Today, the former economist is a master shofar-maker, and the weeks before Rosh HaShanah see nonstop traffic through his workshop, from both local shofar-blowers and those from abroad. "The shofar," he says, "is not just an instrument. It becomes attached to the person's soul"

The SHOFAR MASTER

by **Estee Reid**

"Abba, you must become a *baal tokeia* [shofar-blower]," insisted young Daniella Ninchinsky as she lay on her sickbed, fighting for her life. This strange request set off a chain of transitions for the Ninchinsky family — a change of lifestyle, country, and commitment to spiritual pursuits. "Yet at the time," sighs Reb Dovid Ninchinsky, "I had no

idea why I was being presented with such a bizarre idea."

Reb Dovid Ninchinsky is an unusual blend of personal charm and rock-solid faith, and his personal life story could fill the pages of a novel. Having swung the pendulum of human experience through his own life's trials, all the while feeling his constant connection to his Creator, makes him particularly suited to his newest profession —

creating shofars, the quintessential instrument of Jewish prayer.

During those years the Ninchinskys lived in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. "In my synagogue there was an elderly man who essentially served every function. He was the sexton, the *chazzan*, the *baal korei* [Torah reader] and *baal tokeia*. So, following my daughter's request, I approached him with the following request: 'Teach me to blow the shofar.'

This dear man, Yirmiyahu Mirnik, looked at me, disbelieving. 'What do you know about a shofar?' he demanded. 'Blowing a shofar doesn't mean putting the horn in your mouth and making a sound come out!' I explained that I indeed knew nothing, and that is why I was here. For the next six months he taught me all the various halachos and customs, types of *tekiyos*, and spiritual intentions that accompany the different sounds. Only

after six months did he let me bring his holy shofar to my lips, bearing the following message: 'When a Jew blows the shofar, it has to come from his *neshamah*. It's the *neshamah* that blows the shofar, not the mouth.'"

After all this intense preparation, Reb Dovid approached Daniella's deathbed and blew the shofar for her. Her pure joy was unbounded. But the project didn't end there. In fact, this was just the start of a new life for Dovid Ninchinsky.

"In many communities, and in Brazil specifically, the shofars are gifts donated to the shul by someone who saw what looks like an impressive instrument but doesn't necessarily know the mark of a real, quality shofar. So the *baal tokeia* has to make the best of it. When I started to blow, I began to search out different tools and methods for improving the sound, filing a little here, using a special screw there. I went through dozens of shofars until I finally perfected a method for the shofar to give off its maximal acoustic beauty. I study the anatomical structure of each shofar, clean out the inside, and smooth it down with special tools I developed for this purpose, to give the shofar perfect sound."

The result: each of Reb Dovid's shofars sounds great from every angle, not only when one "gets the right angle," because every angle produces the same clear sound. Sometimes it takes hours to perfect an almost-perfect sound.

"More than once I've gone to sleep, and have dreamed of what small adjustment to make. In the morning I follow the instruction of my dream and the shofar comes out perfect."

Reb Dovid's shofars are what a Stradivarius violin — which can sell for over \$3 million — is to a regular fiddle.

"A *baal tokeia* might have ten to fifteen shofars with which he switches off. I think a good *baal tokeia* only needs one. If it's a true, quality shofar, he can blow with confidence, not having to worry if the sound will be good or not, but putting his energy instead into the holy intentions of the notes, concentrating on connecting the congregation to spiritual heights."

Reb Dovid's shofars are used by Rav Itche Rosmarin, the Gerrer Rebbe's *baal tokeia*, and serve the Rebbes of Erloi, Belz, Sadigur, and Sanz. Reb Dovid himself is a *baal tokeia* in the shul of Rav Binyamin Zilber of the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah.

During the month of Elul, Dovid Ninchinsky's home in Beitar turns into

a veritable shofar market with nonstop traffic from both Israeli *baalei tokeia* and those from abroad who want to improve the sound of their personal shofars.

"In my work, I meet men who can barely make it through the month, but when it comes to their shofar, they'll go to any lengths. One day, a young Sanzer chassid comes to me and asks me to help him find a shofar that will be easy for him to blow. 'I'm going to England for the Yamim Tovim and I'll be blowing shofar there,' he told me. This young man had no blowing experience at all, and I was shocked that even a lax congregation would hire someone with no experience. 'A large congregation?' I asked. 'Not exactly,' he answered. 'It's a prison. My father is incarcerated there, and he got permission to use a special room where we can daven. So I want to be able to blow shofar for him.' I was so moved by this story, that several years later when I personally met the Sanzer Rebbe, I shared the story with him.

"The shofar has a life of its own," Reb Dovid explains. "It breathes, it contracts germs, it suffocates if closed in plastic, and even passes on viruses from other shofars. A shofar is joyous or sad, depending on how it's related to. Before I begin to blow, I approach the shofar and speak to it for at least half an hour. I ask it not to embarrass me.

"The shofar is not a regular instrument," he continues. "Any other instrument requires years of study to master, and after that just requires practice. But a shofar is different. Training never ends for the rest of your life — this is because blowing the shofar and personal haughtiness cannot go together. A person works his entire life to cleanse himself of haughtiness, and this is the constant work of the shofar."

Of all the shofars that have passed through his hands, there is one that he became especially attached to and refuses to sell, despite lucrative offers.

"One wealthy Jew from Herzliya offered me a small fortune for it, but I explained to him that a shofar becomes part of the soul of a person. This shofar has accompanied me through so many of my journeys that it has become part of my soul. How can I part with it?"

Although Reb Dovid is considered an expert *baal tokeia*, during the month of Elul he continues to "work out," practicing at least 300 *tekiyos* daily. "It's a simple calculation," he explains. "If a person is going to enter a mountain-climbing



Twenty-eight years later, Daniella's diary still serves as an inspiration for the family

competition and practices climbing every day with 50 kilos [110 lbs] on his back, by the time the day arrives, he'll be able to run up the mountain. If I practice 300 *tekiyos* every day, the 100 *tekiyos* of Rosh HaShanah will be easier."

In any case, no matter how much one practices or how much one spends on a quality shofar, Reb Dovid is convinced that it isn't the person who maintains the shofar but the other way around, "like the Aron Kodesh in the Beis HaMikdash which carried its bearers."

Across the Globe Reb Dovid's own life reads like the parable of the wandering Jew. He was born sixty-two years ago in Shanghai, China, where his parents had fled from Russia several years before, escaping the Communist revolution.

"My mother's family marched on foot from Krasniask, Siberia, to China, and settled in Harbin, which was already being populated by Jews. Her father became a successful businessman and her mother ran a guest house. When my father was fourteen, he also traversed Siberia to China. Because of his modern, anti-communist leanings, his parents allowed him to leave, but it turned out that he encountered the communists once he got to China.

"After my parents married, my father became a sales agent for Dupont, but its worldwide success was mitigated in China because of communist policies. In 1949, when Mao Tse-tung came to power, my father became a target of constant harassment. I'll never forget those scenes. Chinese law forbade the arrest of a father while in the company of his children, so he took me, a young child, to all the interrogations on the pretense that he didn't speak the language well, while I was fluent in both Russian and Chinese."

For years, Reb Dovid's parents petitioned the authorities to emigrate, and finally they received permission to enter Brazil.

"This was a disaster for my parents. Years

living under Communist rule all but wiped out their Jewish affiliation so Israel was never considered an option. But in Brazil, if you don't know Portuguese you can't even buy in the grocery, let alone find a decent job. My mother, a refined intellectual who read literary Russian, was relegated to cleaning houses. When I was just in fifth grade, my father had a second heart attack, and I had to go out to work to help support our family."

As a child he worked as an errand boy for a pittance, but through the years his effort and diligence paid off, and by the time he was just seventeen he was offered a respectable job with Varig Brazilian Airlines.

Several years later Reb Dovid married a woman from a traditional family and began to attend synagogue and keep Shabbos. He also decided to make up his education, completing equivalency exams for elementary and high school, and picking up a university degree. From Varig he went to work for El Al, eventually becoming head of El Al's Brazilian office.

And then a series of events happened that changed their lives forever. In 1976, the Ninchinskys' eldest daughter, Daniella,

just six, was diagnosed with leukemia. Through his airline connections, Reb Dovid was able to send her medical file to experts worldwide, but good news was not forthcoming. Long-term survival seemed nil.

"On one of my trips to New York, I was encouraged by my Chabad friends in Brazil to go to Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn. I left a packet outlining Daniella's medical condition with the *gabbaim* and then left. Later, my friend Rav Eliyahu Naimark brought me a package from the Rebbe — two dollars, a siddur which I still keep with me, and instructions for being stricter with kashrus.

"Meanwhile, Daniella's situation kept sliding downhill, yet we never heard a word of complaint, except for that surprising refrain, 'Abba, you must learn to blow the shofar.'"

Life and Death "It was the first day of Pesach, and Daniella had been suffering for nearly four years when she took a turn for the worse and had to be hospitalized. At the time my wife was also expecting. We were at Daniella's bedside for forty-nine days, and Erev Shavuot the doctors told us to be prepared to part from her. We gathered a minyan around her to say Vidui, when suddenly my wife whispered that 'it was time.' She was rushed down to the maternity ward on the floor below. I can't even begin to describe the feeling — torn between the hope of new life and the dread of death.

"An hour later my wife gave birth to a preemie baby boy who weighed less than a kilogram. I ran back upstairs and announced that I get a mazel tov, while Daniella was breathing her last breaths.



Reb Dovid Ninchinsky's workshop in Beitar: "The shofar has a life of its own"

And then a nurse ran in with the news: 'You also have a daughter! Your wife had twins!' I was in shock — we had no idea! That was the last thing Daniella heard. Right after Yom Tov, her holy *neshamah* ascended to Heaven.

"Three months later, and the babies were still hospitalized in incubators, and neither had received a name — it was still too soon for a bris and we just couldn't decide on an appropriate girl's name. Meanwhile, Daniella's memory lingered in every corner of the house, and my wife stumbled on a diary she had written some months before she died.

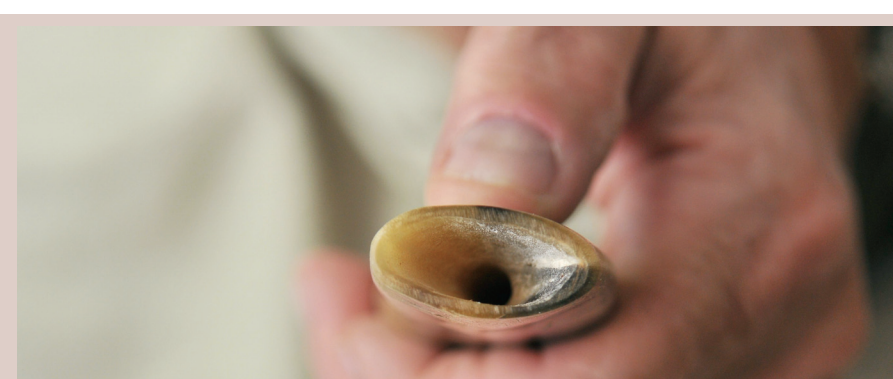
"*I will leave this world at age ten, Daniella wrote. My neshamah will rise to Heaven and will settle in a beautiful green, magical forest where everything is at peace. My mother will give birth to twins, a boy and a girl. The boy will be named Daniel after me, and the girl will be called Miriam Tamar, as this is the story of my own life — starting out bitter ("mar") and ending in sweetness like a date ("tamar").*

"Then one Friday, Daniel, the baby, had become ill and my wife realized she'd be spending Shabbos with him in the hospital. After all the trauma we'd been through, this was just overwhelming and my wife broke down and began to cry, when out of the blue, an old man with a white beard appeared to her and comforted her, telling her to quickly light Shabbos candles and encouraging her to be strong for her remaining children. The man disappeared as quickly as he came, and when my wife ran to look for him, she was told that no such person ever entered the hospital. We understood that perhaps Eliyahu HaNavi had paid us a visit."

Moving Forward At this point the Ninchinskys realized that their future was no longer in Brazil. Something big and spiritual was happening, and they were being called to move on.

"I was no refugee like my parents were," Reb Dovid says. "I had another year and a half to go with El Al in order to attain a lifetime pension. We had a huge house, live-in help, and social status, but we knew the time had come to give something back to Hashem, so we left it all to come to Israel — where we knew we would have the most spiritual growth. So there I was in mid-life, again an immigrant having to learn a new language — my fifth — pounding the pavement in search of a job. But even here, I continued to see Divine assistance."

Reb Dovid had been in *ulpan* three months to gain a minimal usage of



Perfected mouthpiece: these shofars sound clear from every angle

Hebrew, when he was informed that he was being considered for an economic position in the Health Ministry. The interview was scheduled for Friday morning, and Reb Dovid, not believing the interview would last more than fifteen minutes, schlepped his *shuk* shopping baskets along with him.

"I don't think I gave one intelligent answer — I could barely understand what they were asking me, and there they were, offering me the position of supervising the budgets of all the government hospitals!

"Truthfully, the work was murder in the beginning and time after time I wanted to quit. Every day my wife would force me to go to work. Eventually I became acclimated to the language and the mentality. But as I saw blessings in *parnassah*, I was having great difficulty in the area of my children's education — the very reason for our move. Without going into all the negative details, I could not get my children into any quality school. It was only through the

dedication of Rav Eliyahu Shlessinger, the Rav of the Gilo neighborhood where we lived, that our children's *chinuch* worked out. Rav Shlessinger approached the administration of his own sons' cheder and his daughters' Bais Yaakov and threatened to pull them out if they would not accept my children."

When Reb Dovid looks at the difficult journeys that make up his life, bitterness and resentment just don't figure in. "It's true that my wife and I sacrificed much, but today our children are where we want them to be. Our sons learned in the finest yeshivos, and today our daughter runs a kindergarten with close to seventy children. If I paved a path, it was only that they can continue to teach, to influence, and to give to others.

"When Daniella told me I must learn to blow the shofar, I didn't understand. And even when I began to learn about the shofar, I still didn't understand. Until today, my family in Brazil still doesn't understand. But now I understand. In Daniella's merit, I'll leave over someone who'll be able to say Kaddish over me." ■



Reb Dovid: "A good *baal tokeia* needs just one quality shofar"

"My mother, a refined intellectual who read literary Russian, was relegated to cleaning houses. When I was just in fifth grade, my father had a second heart attack, and I had to go out to work to help support our family"